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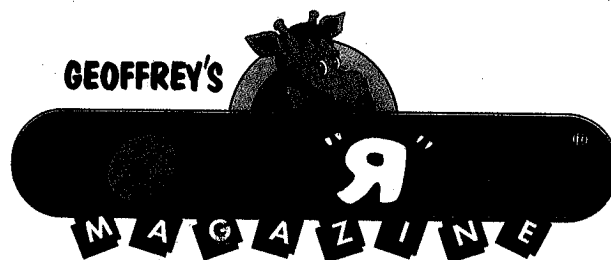
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THE BIG DAY

by Jack Ritchie

There was no question about it, I was now more nervous than I'd ever been before a game. "When do we go out?"

Big Jim Davis looked at his watch. "In ten minutes. Take it easy."

"How's the crowd?"

"Full house. Forty-two thousand people in the stands today."

Forty-two thousand people were in the ball park to watch a big league baseball game. And it wasn't the first day of the season either. It was now September and the pennant races were be-

ginning to tighten up.

But it was the first day in the big leagues for me and I was wondering how I would do out there. This was my big chance. Would I be good enough or would I somehow blow it?

Big Jim sensed how I felt. "You'll do all right, kid. Just keep your mind on the game and don't let anybody rattle you."

Big Jim Davis was a veteran of ten years in the big leagues, never missing a game. A real pro, he was a good man to have on your side. Nothing seems to bother him. He's the kind of a guy who

makes it easier for the rest of us and we all respect him.

Forty-two thousand people out there and that was only the frosting on the cake. The game was being nationally televised and that meant that millions of people across the country would also be watching. Staring at the screen. Staring at me.

My throat was dry again, so I walked over to the locker room fountain and took another long drink.

My parents would be before the TV set at home. And my sister too. Actually Mom and Sis never really cared much about baseball—Dad is the real fan—but they would be watching the game today.

I was still young. A rookie. I suppose I'd come up as fast as anybody, but looking back now it seemed like a long long road stretching into the past.

When I was just a little kid, I would stand on the sidelines watching my father on the playing field and wishing I were out there too. I would follow every ball, every play.

I think Dad could have made it to the top himself. He was that good. But I guess he just never got the breaks. Or maybe other things came first with him, like being with me while I was growing up.

No, Dad hadn't made it to the big leagues, but I knew he was reliving his life in me—following my career and maybe thinking about how it might have been if things had been just a little different.

From the beginning my life was built around the game of baseball, but I could never get really serious about it until after I graduated from high school and was free to do what I wanted with my time. And when you're serious about getting anywhere, you've got to work hard at it full time. You've got to get to know the game forwards and backwards.

There's a lot more to baseball than most people think or see. It isn't all hitting and fielding. There's the mental part, too, and you've got to approach the game with the right attitude.

You've got to learn to take the good days with the bad, knowing that you've always done the best you can and believing that what you're doing is important to the scheme of things.

Even in the off-season, I never let myself get soft or stale. I always kept in shape and watched my diet. I would jog at least three miles every day

because I was determined to be in tip-top shape when my big chance came.

Yes, I began right there at the bottom. First the sandlots, then the semi-pros, and then the minors. Places like Des Moines, Appleton, Wisconsin Rapids. And I would spend the lonely nights in small town hotel rooms dreaming about the future I knew would come.

I had been in Wausau when the telegram came. There had been a collision at first base on a close play and when the dust had settled, Robertson lay on the ground with a busted ankle. He was out for the season and they wanted me to report to Baltimore right away.

I had just enough time to pack my suitcases, phone my parents to tell them the news, and then catch a plane to Chicago and from there on to Baltimore.

Now I went to the locker room mirror and stared at myself again.

Yes, I was here. I had finally made it. I had always thought that I was as good as anybody in the game—I had that confidence you needed—but still, right now I was about as tense as a person could be and worried. I took a deep breath. Well, I had come a long way and now it was too late to have any reservations or doubts.

Big Jim looked at his watch again. "Time to earn our money."

I swallowed hard and followed him out the tunnel under the stadium and into the sunlight of the ball park.

After the national anthem was played, I took my position at first base, and the game began.

I was hoping that nothing would come my way—at least not so soon—and it didn't until the third inning.

Evans hit one deep to the shortstop who bobbled the ball for a second before making the throw. It was a close play, but Evans was safe at first.

O'Brien, the first baseman, turned on me with fire in his eyes and the Oriole's manager stormed out of the dugout.

I folded my arms across my chest and put on my best scowl. Let them come. I wouldn't back down an inch. I call them as I see them.

This was my first day and my first play, but I was now a big league umpire.

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